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FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1830

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHINGTON DC

RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE USD FAS WASHINGTON DC

RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0071

RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 0378

RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI

RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2240

UNCLAS KOLKATA 000019

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

DEPT PLS PASS HHS - STEIGER AND HICKEY, PLS PASS CDC - NCOX, SBLOUNT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KFLU TBIO EAGR SENV PGOV CASC IN

SUBJECT: AI IN W. BENGAL MAY BE SPREADING: SITREP 4 - JANUARY 17

REF: KOLKATA 11, KOLKATA 14, KOLKATA 17

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: As of 1500 hours local time on January 17, reports of poultry deaths have come in from additional districts close to ground-zero (Margram) and in districts closer to Kolkata. Some poultry deaths have also been reported in neighboring Jharkhand state. The media, quoting GOI officials, blamed the Government of West Bengal (GOWB) for the slow response to the H5N1 outbreak. The first day of culling on January 16 was marked by villagers' refusal to permit culling, and difficulties in logistics and coordination, which lead to a low number of culled birds. Poultry owners reported a drastic reduction in sales in Kolkata and other parts of West Bengal.
END SUMMARY.

¶12. (U) By 1500 hours on January 17, reports of poultry deaths began coming in from new areas, indicating that the H5N1 virus may have spread. New villages reporting unusual poultry deaths are Muraroi I, Muraroi II, and Rampurhat (Birbhum district), and four sectors of Khargram (Murshidabad district). These locations are contiguous to Margram (Birbhum district), where the outbreak was first reported. GOWB officials have collected samples and begun culling birds in these areas.

¶13. (U) Areas not adjacent to Margram may now be affected as well. Poultry deaths were reported in Baruipur (South 24 Parganas district), Karimpur (Nadia district), Kalna and Katoa (Bardhaman district) and Goghat (Hugli district). These districts are located south of Margram, closer to Kolkata. Baruipur is approximately 15 miles south of the Kolkata city center. GOWB officials have collected samples for testing, but have not/not begun culling birds in these areas.

¶14. (U) Pakaur town, which is north of Margram in the neighboring state of Jharkhand, has also reported unusual poultry deaths. GOWB officials told Post that the Jharkhand Animal Resources Department (ARD) has taken samples from these birds for testing.

¶15. (U) The media, quoting senior GOI officials, is harshly critical of GOWB authorities, claiming that the GOWB delay in reporting the unusual bird deaths permitted the virus to spread from Margram. The reports claim that the GOWB received news of unusual poultry deaths as early as January 4, but only reported the incidents to the federal government on January 11. Photos in the media show officials in protective gear holding dead birds as villagers cluster around, as well as children playing near dead birds.

¶16. (SBU). The handling of dead and possibly infected birds by villagers is a cause of concern and may start bird to human

infection. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare officials have stated to the CDC AI coordinator at Post that, "we are nervous and watching the situation very closely."

¶ 17. (U) West Bengal's Minister for Animal Resources Department (ARD) Anisur Rahman has admitted there was a delay in reporting the incidents, but that it was not deliberate. Apparently, the ARD dismissed the early reports of bird deaths as Ranikhet disease, citing the recent GOI certification of India as free of the H5N1 virus.

¶ 18. (U) Culling efforts are now concentrated on 102 villages in and around Margram. Rahman told Post that his team only culled 9,000 birds on January 16, although they had targeted 100,000. He cited a lack of coordination among different government agencies and villagers' reluctance to allow culling as the reason. Rahman expects culling figures to go up significantly in the next few days. The GOI Animal Resources Department is complementing GOWB efforts by sending 180 workers in 36 Rapid Response Teams.

¶ 19. (U) The poultry industry has reported a steep reduction in consumption. In Kolkata, consumption has dropped by 60 percent from its average daily level of 250,000 kilograms. In rural areas, consumption is down by as much as 80 percent. The price of chicken has dropped by approximately 20 percent.

¶ 110. (U) COMMENT: Despite training and orientation workshops, the GOWB response to the emerging H5N1 outbreak has been inadequate. Public awareness in rural W. Bengal about AI is also demonstrably lacking and raises concerns about the possibility of human infection.

JARDINE